

# Making Workers Real: regulatory spotlights and documentary stepping-stones on a South African border farm

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SPECIAL SECTION

## Making workers real

### Regulatory spotlights and documentary stepping-stones on a South African border farm

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Documents are central to the infrastructure through which formal workforces are constituted. They thus offer a privileged vantage point onto how formality is asserted and experienced as real. On the Zimbabwean–South African border, where formality is a plural and uneven patchwork of “formalizations,” thousands of migrants are employed on export-oriented commercial farms. Connections between state institutions and workplaces are regulatory spotlights. More complex than employee protection or domination, or than window-dressing fiction, they make workers by recognizing them as different from “border jumpers.” Workers make their own use of spotlights. Documents become stepping-stones, as migrants broker conversions toward more durable forms of worker identity. They navigate the constellation of fixed points that documents represent, bringing coherence to fragmentary encounters. Spotlights and stepping-stones lie at the point where formal regulation and livelihood plans constitute one another, and thereby establish the shared ground for negotiating the “reality” of a wage economy.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, South Africa, real economy, farm labor, formality, documents, marginality

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On the Zimbabwean–South African border, migrant laborers toil in gangs of thirty to fill trailers full of fruit, or work their way, backs bent, along rows of cotton. Black overseers stand nearby, shouting to keep the pace up. A little farther away, black foremen and white managers look on from their pickup trucks. Occasionally a white farmer drives up, clad in khaki, an Alsatian alert in the pickup’s passenger seat, to check on progress. As month-end nears, recent border crossers sit within reach, hoping that attrition will translate into opportunities for recruitment. After all, in



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the wake of Zimbabwe's political and economic troubles, the border's agricultural workforces—almost entirely Zimbabwean—are far from stable entities. Indeed, they are full of people who until recently never thought they would set foot on a commercial farm, who still have a hard time thinking of themselves as farm workers at all, and who in some cases keep going southward as soon as their first month's pay arrives. As night draws in, workers trudge down the access roads, past row upon row of crops, back to the barrack-like labor compounds where they are housed on their employers' land. In this landscape, characterized both by transience and plantation-style isolation, recent arrivals feel like they are barely in South Africa. Morning register is called in TshiVenda, the language of the border region, or ChiShona, the majority language of Zimbabwe. Only overzealous police, arriving with escorts from the border garrisons to load the undocumented into vans, remind workers that they are in a country with the best-resourced state institutions in the region.

Yet, if the farms are located on the geographical margins, they are also nodes in a globalized economic network. This is revealed by turning from the orchards and fields to the packsheds into which crops flow, and specifically to Grootplaas Estates, one of the border's citrus operations. Here, a huge double-conveyor system carries oranges and grapefruits from washing to waxing, to inspection and grading stations, and to packers' boxes via an optical machine that photographically organizes fruit by size. In the loading bay, pallets piled high with crates of oranges and grapefruits await trucks to the Indian Ocean port of Durban. From there, ships will take them to countries across Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Crate designs signal different agents, buyers, and brands: local, national, British, American. Michael, Grootplaas' personnel manager and packshed administrator, moves between the stacks, dressed in a white coat and armed with a clipboard as he prepares labels that detail each pallet's journey. The pallets evoke industrial-scale production, global connections, and the clinical formality of factories in the fields—far from the stereotypes of South African farms as quasi-feudal, anachronistic backwaters.

On display, at the very center of the packshed's network of conveyor belts and observation gantries, is Michael's harvest-time office, a statement about the importance of paperwork. Bureaucratic categories structure the whole packing process: fruit size; exportability versus rejection for local sale or juicing; export grade A or B, which affects price although it depends only on the superficial assessment of skin blemishes. By contrast, out on the lands, maintaining standards is restricted to the periodic admonishment of pickers who, in their haste, leave stalks attached (puncturing other fruit) or crowns ripped out (leading the fruit to rot faster). Nevertheless, paperwork extends into workers' lives. Alongside the export labels and documents lie Grootplaas's personnel records, for which Michael is also responsible. These follow him in a bank of filing cabinets, as he moves seasonally between the packshed and the farm's workshop. The contents tell a particular version of work and life on the border farms. Applications for employment, contracts, South African documents for "normalization" (regularization), and records of dismissal all speak in a corporate register—"thank you for your interest in our company." But, among these documents, Zimbabwean departure permits signed by thumbprint speak of other experiences—migrant workers fleeing the estate, even without their official identification.

For black workers, laboring on the border's white-owned commercial farms involves constantly relating to official and semiofficial documents and

institutionalized arrangements. This is what we expect of formal employment. But how is formality realized? What does this tell us about the “reality” of this wage economy more generally?

On South Africa’s border farms, formal employment absorbs migrants into social arrangements that organize space and time. Labor hierarchies bring around-the-clock authority that extends into the residential labor compounds. This reflects the enduring spatial significance of hubs of production in South Africa. Under apartheid, migrants’ rights to residence and mobility in “white” areas came with formal employment. Resident workforces themselves represented sites of thoroughgoing incorporation, not merely income (Ferguson 2013). On today’s border, being regarded as a “worker” rather than a “border jumper” legitimates migrants’ presence in a strikingly similar manner, and attachment to officially acknowledged workplaces mitigates the extreme transience that characterizes the area.

Membership enables residents to use the labor compounds to anchor informal economic activities: trade such as running *shebeens* (illegal bars) and *spazas* (general stores); services such as running taxis, cutting hair, and repairing clothes; and smuggling, such as of cigarettes and marijuana. Considerable opportunities are created through proximity to the border, and the isolation on remote farms of hundreds of residents with monthly wages. Indeed, workers even acquire formal employment as a means to establish existing business activities. As I have argued elsewhere (Bolt 2012), what comes to matter is not remaining invisible to state officials. Rather, the necessary scope for diverse livelihood strategies is created by being visible and recognized in a particular way—as a farm worker.

This article traces how contracts, permits, and inspections shape and sustain the all-important notion of a formal “worker.” This means going beyond a focus on labor dynamics themselves, and beyond examining divergences between management rules and employees’ self-understandings and practices (e.g., Burawoy 1979). It means tracing fragmented “formalities” in the plural (see Guyer 2004), and appreciating how coherence emerges as an effect of different projects and interactions in and beyond a workforce. Different parties have a stake in upholding the reality of formalized labor relations, and the figure of the worker at their heart. For white farmers who are often considered apartheid throwbacks, a corporate style keeps regulatory authorities at bay, even though managerialism and personnel documentation have little reach beyond their offices. For state officials, recognizing workers as opposed to border jumpers is key to reading the landscape of the border, even if this is often arbitrary and relies on a murky negotiation of ambiguous documentation. For the employed themselves, recognition promises to stabilize the terms of everyday life, even if the ultimate goal is often to use institutional validation as a means to escape in search of better opportunities. In a turbulent border setting, formality remains fragile. But asserting it establishes the terms on which workers and the wage economy are experienced as real—and how, in the words of this special section’s introduction, that reality comes to appear self-evident (Neiburg and Guyer, this issue).<sup>1</sup>

1. This account draws on seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork (2006–8), while in residence in Grootplaas’ labor compound. During the citrus harvest, I worked unpaid in a picking team and grading fruit in the packshed. Much of border farm life

## Formality, “the economy,” and economic lives

In what sense is the formal economy real? Substantial intellectual energy has been invested in understanding informality (see, for example, Hart 1973; MacGaffey 1991; Roitman 2004; Meagher 2010). This has produced the notion of a real economy as making a living *beyond* official measurement (see MacGaffey 1991), therefore exposing the restricted parameters of a state perspective. What happens under the radar is key on the Zimbabwean–South African border, where regulation has limited reach and livelihoods are patched together by multiple means. But how does formally measuring and recognizing workforce membership make a wage economy in such a setting?

If one version of the real economy is informal, recent analyses take a very different starting point. Here, “the economic” is produced as an object of expertise (Callon 2007), and through infrastructures of distributed human and nonhuman agency (see Çalışkan and Callon 2009, 2010). Indeed, it is through “socio-technical practice” and measurement, including from within the discipline of economics, that the economy itself is brought into being in this sense—by drawing together diverse practices into a single field of administration and engineering (Mitchell 1998, 2008). In this set of perspectives, economies are realized through networks of regulation and calculation, and their categories and effects. But they provoke questions about economic lives more broadly, and about a more expansive notion of the economy “as consisting of all the processes that are involved, in one fashion or another, in ‘making a living’” (Narotzky and Besnier 2014: S5).

How might the realization of this narrower economy be brought into conversation with the other, under-the-radar “real economy”? How do people’s attempts to make a living weave in and out of the infrastructures and the frames of reference that constitute “the economy” as object? As they do so, what other kinds of practical knowledge underpin the realization of formality’s infrastructures and regulatory frameworks?

Timothy Mitchell (2002) helpfully notes that formalization is not simply a matter of representing economic activity, or a dichotomy between measurement and its object. The material economy comes to appear starkly opposed to immaterial and disembodied observation. Instead, however, the concrete practices of regulating and measuring create and sustain a distinct economic field. Measurement is part of the real economy, understood as the formal organization of diverse processes concerning wealth and livelihoods, as the latter come to be defined. Mitchell is interested in how national economies are realized, and his approach consequently restricts the use of the term *economic* in the manner discussed above. But his insights can usefully be applied to the intertwining of key economic categories and the pursuit of livelihoods at smaller scales—here, the figure of the worker in a single workforce. Workers are not simply catalogued and regulated through distant processes of formal documentation. Rather, processes of documentation are integral to life on the border farms, and the resulting paperwork creates workers—explicitly recognized by state and farm authorities as incorporated into settings that are

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has remained unchanged, and I write in the present tense to avoid an undue sense of distance, but I draw attention to relevant shifts.

both farmers' private worlds and globalized places of production. Where one body of scholarship presents the real economy as beyond measurement, and another defines it precisely as what is measured, this article explores the space in between. It examines the co-constitution of a regulatory regime and the broader livelihood projects that weave in and out of it.

If economies are at one level realized through regulatory regimes, the making of economic formality through documentary processes is far from straightforward. Documents are implicated in the diverse projects of workers, employers, and state officials. They thus enable performances of formality—including the coproduction of the figure of the worker—that are motivated by goals irreducible to formal logics. The corollary is that, even as documents produce shared understandings of formality, they fail to forge well-measured economic practices in the way recent scholars have emphasized.

Indeed, workers' visibility to and recognition by state officials and other actors may be fragmentary and multiple. That is why I take the metaphor of *spotlights* as a starting point here. State institutions “see” (Scott 1999) workplaces through spotlights such as inspections, permits, and employment contracts, and these do not simply comprise a coherent network. Connections emerge as the result of strategy and skill. They do so as different parties make use of the agreed authority of documents in a range of encounters, augmenting that authority in the process, to get things done in and beyond the labor setting itself. Hence, the second metaphor in this article: that of *stepping-stones*. Focusing on how projects are enacted by jumping from one document to the next reveals the goals and the techniques through which documentary networks are given a particular coherence. Crucially, in the kind of transient, migratory setting explored below, the status of worker may itself be a stepping-stone to something else.

Recent scholarship has explored the place of documents in governing people and space, and in the ways people “acquiesce to, contest, or use this governance” (M. Hull 2012b: 1). Documents are “graphic artifacts” whose “circulation . . . creates associations among people that often differ from formal organizational structures” (M. Hull 2012b: 18). Whether in large bureaucracies or on remote border estates, such associations have far-reaching consequences. As publicly acknowledged “traces”—“inscriptions” that attest to people's past acts and current status (Ferraris 2013: 253–54)—documents take on especial significance in a place where migrants strive for stability amid transience. In a range of settings, migrants are forced to navigate bureaucratic infrastructures and create their own coherence from the informal and improvised practices that characterize state institutions themselves (Coutin 2000; Vigneswaran et al. 2010; Tuckett 2015). This essay offers the view from within a workforce where the allure of formality lies at the heart of a migrant-labor regime. Formality is brokered through social relations, in which official and semiofficial paperwork—with its apparent fixity of meaning—becomes the focal point for negotiation and efforts to shape circumstances.

On South Africa's border with Zimbabwe, beyond the packshed with its labeled, bar-coded crates and its conveyor belts, formality is a diverse mosaic of connections to officialdom. Grootplaas' white farmers learn how to navigate these spotlights skillfully, presenting the farm appropriately while continuing to operate according to their own rules. In the process, state and farm institutions together



shape black workers' lives while sustaining a field of delimited "personnel relations." Amid a range of patterns of movement and settlement on the farms, and a range of forms of trade and dependence in residents' livelihoods, official and semi-official documents are key to recognizing workers—that is, to making *workers* real as a distinct category.

Grootplaas' workers also navigate the terrain of formality. Idioms of due process have little effect on personalized hierarchies, but a range of more or less official documents is key to employees' lives, strategies, and self-understandings. Migrants are extremely diverse in terms of their class backgrounds and places of origin. Many arrive with little other than their Zimbabwean identity cards and sheaves of qualification certificates, whose power comes from the presumed durability of their meaning and value through time. Once employed, different identity documents attaching workers to the farm enable new conditions for life. For workers, as much as for their employers, using documents takes adeptness: deciding when to reveal them; extending their uses to new circumstances; converting between them. Between the two extremes archived in Grootplaas' filing cabinets—corporate personnel records and abandoned identity cards and papers—is a world in which everyday lives and possibilities for the future are negotiated through the category of *worker*.

My emphasis on the production of formality offers an alternative way of approaching how workers are made. Given the context, a more obvious starting point would be migrants' subjection to the requirements of export agriculture in particular, and capitalism in general. Certainly, workers' lives on the border farms are powerfully shaped by the temporal regimes of capitalism. As I have explored previously (Bolt 2013), the relatively independent task orientation of permanent employees contrasts with their seasonal counterparts' tight labor discipline—the latter coordinated to harvest fruit for export within northern-hemisphere tariff windows. Yet, at a more general level, all workers are defined through the interchangeability of their different activities as abstract labor time, mediated by an equivalent standard of value created by the commodity form (see Postone 1993). Capitalism in Zimbabwe and South Africa was classically shaped by "delayed proletarianization": the persistence of rural agricultural bases that could supplement, although not ultimately reduce dependence on, commodities and waged employment (for Zimbabwe, see Arrighi 1970; Phimister 1988). Yet many Zimbabweans have seen even this eroded amid economic crisis, as rural homes come to rely overwhelmingly on remittances (Bolt 2015: 212).

This subjection to capitalism—life premised on the commodity and the wage—leaves migrants vulnerable. But it therefore becomes all the more important to understand how they work to stabilize the terms of their lives by gaining everyday recognition as workers, not simply by providing their labor. The view from one migrant workforce reveals attempts to control and stabilize the meanings of connections between workers, between workers and employers, and between the workplace and state officials. In turn, particular objects and processes enable the wage economy to be recognized as the real foundation of all of these interactions, by recognizing workers. Despite the imaginative power and apparent coherence of the formal sector and the figure of the worker in South Africa (Barchiesi 2011), workers and employers encounter formalities as a constellation of points through which to navigate. Yet the result is that formal registers of labor have a common-sense



reality about them, as they become bound up with plans and projects for making a living. Formality—fragmentary, ambiguous, and emphasized and de-emphasized by different parties at different times—nevertheless anchors the everyday terms of life in a transient setting.

### Formality and marginality in South Africa

Grootplaas is one of a string of family-run crop estates on the southern bank of the Limpopo River, which marks the border. Large and high profile like some of its neighbors, Grootplaas employs 140 permanent workers, and 460 seasonal workers during the picking season. The farm reached one million crates of citrus in 2007, its oranges and grapefruits sold in British and other European Union supermarkets as well as in the Middle East and East Asia.

Tied into global supply chains, Grootplaas is regulated through both state and nonstate inspections. The Department of Labour, for example, visits the border farms for periodic evaluations of working conditions. GLOBALG.A.P. (formerly EUREPGAP), a standards agency that certifies produce for European markets, surveys hygiene conditions as well as “worker welfare.” Some supermarkets have their own, even stricter investigation processes. It is during all of these that the filing cabinets of worker records become important, as they stand for proper procedure on the farm.

This appears indicative of a South Africa of far-reaching formality, in which the economy is dominated by regulated international linkages, oversight is the basis of a pervasive infrastructure, and workforces are governed by distinct and explicitly monitored codes. Formal logics of state and capital have a greater bureaucratic reach and imaginative hold than elsewhere in the region. Life on the ground is deeply enmeshed in interlocking public and corporate institutions (see, for example, James 2014; Ferguson 2015). Yet, analytical terms that constitute *the economy* as object can betray a bias to formal regulatory rhetoric (Guyer 2014). In debates about the fate of formal work (for example, Seekings and Nattrass 2005; Callebert 2014), what emerges is a world in which formality is a “sector,” and in which workers’ livelihoods might plausibly be addressed in the universalist, material/structural idiom of a “standard of living” (Guyer 2014: 149). South Africa can appear less messy, more structurally determined, more sharply categorized. But, like elsewhere on the continent, regulatory islands have stood in contrast to a conspicuous lack of information. The far-reaching ambitions of state and capital to register and categorize nonwhite people, beginning around the turn of the twentieth century, were always frustrated by incapacity and the profusion of blind spots (Breckenridge 2014). The South African state has been “defined by its control of the flow of resources, fiercely delimiting the transfer of benefits, constitutionally disinterested in and incapable of knowledge about the vast majority of its subjects” (Breckenridge 2014: 214).

Scholarship on wage labor in southern Africa has long explored the implications of inclusion in export-oriented enclaves (for example, Gluckman 1961; Moodie with Ndatshe 1994). Sites of formal employment—epitomized by South Africa’s hyperpoliced, total institution-like mines—were built on migrancy but experienced as sharply distinct from hinterlands of subsistence. Yet inclusion did not mean conforming



to anything resembling the official view of the workplace. The “institutionalisation of industrial relations” has remained fragile (von Holdt 2010: 128). Formal labor hierarchies, and official forms of recognition and regulation, are easily challenged by alternative—and often violent—“local moral orders” (von Holdt 2010).

Even centers of control, then, have been less planned than they appear. Nevertheless, places like Grootplaas are distinctly marginal in relation to centers of urban and industrial infrastructure. Official linkages are dim spotlights, exemplifying less order or regulation than is often assumed to typify South African labor arrangements. Hubs of production on South Africa’s northern border have been shaped by cross-border migrants responding to periodic crises at home, and coercive but ad hoc regimes of policing and recruitment (see, for example, van Onselen 1976; Werbner 1991; Bradford 1993; Murray 1995; Bolt 2015). This, in turn, has meant that recruits have had little attachment to a thoroughgoing worker identity.

If industrial relations have been shallowly institutionalized elsewhere in South Africa, this is exacerbated on the border farms by the sheer diversity of employees, itself the result of spiraling hyperinflation, economic contraction, and the persecution of opposition supporters in Zimbabwe after 2000. Employees hail from marginalized rural areas across the border and beyond, and from cities including the capital, Harare. They range from lifelong farm workers to erstwhile professionals. And they may have little education or be school graduates, even occasionally university graduates. Indeed, recently displaced Zimbabweans on the northern border actively deny being farm workers at all. Former teachers or nurses, or recent A-level graduates, speak of being “in exile,” and of putting life on pause in the meantime. The police share this diffidence, for different reasons—everyone is assumed to be a border jumper first. All of this, of course, renders documents still more important in making formal workers real; they do not simply confirm a widely accepted state of affairs.

One result is a highly vulnerable farm working population (Rutherford and Addison 2007; Rutherford 2008). Here, as elsewhere in the country, a floating reserve of migrant labor has proven useful for farmers responding to market liberalization (Johnston 2007). This setting resembles others where the vulnerability of cross-border migrants is underpinned by grey legal regimes, which leave them perpetually “deportable” (De Genova 2005; see also Heyman 2001). Workers are often confined to their places of work, in a broader environment where they are potential fugitives, as elsewhere historically in South Africa. Such regimes support Ananya Roy’s claim that informal lacunae are best understood as state effects: deliberate “suspensions” of legal order, defined as beyond the law but allowed to persist (2005: 149). Yet places like the Zimbabwean–South African border also reveal the complex configuration of employers’ and workers’ projects through which formality comes to be realized. This is especially visible on agricultural estates where state oversight has always been extremely limited.

Especially at its margins, South Africa has historically been characterized by limited state capacity and piecemeal accommodations. From the first half of the twentieth century, the northern border was the site of different schemes for achieving a measure of control, in turn the result of ever-shifting relations between state institutions and representatives (see MacDonald 2012). Further complicating the picture, a range of private individuals variously acted as informal intermediaries and operated as illegal “labour pirates” (Murray 1995).



Nevertheless, heated debates over regulation were the terrain for contesting the control of territory and human mobility. Messina Copper Mine, the border region's first major employer, attempted in the early twentieth century to gain formal jurisdiction over a large tract of land, ostensibly to prevent malaria but also to police the movement and enlistment of people. Farmers soon began cultivating the border in the same ecosystem of shadowy recruitment, and in periodic competition with ineffective state labor depots (see Bolt 2015). The result was a plurality of ambiguous forms of authority over land and labor.

On South Africa's farms, assumptions persist that white landowners enjoy paternalist sovereignty over their territory and "their people." Government bureaucrats anyway have little capacity to "see" the population they regulate (see Hoag 2010). But such assumptions further complicate what it means for estates like Grootplaas to come under state purview (see, for example, Rutherford 2008), and leave idioms of kinship competing with those of employment (du Toit 1993). If farmers' extra-legal coercion on their "little republics" has largely receded, it has given way to vigilante justice presided over by senior black workers (Bolt 2016). What is more, labor compounds are unfenced, and gradually adapted over years (e.g., housing improvements, food gardens) by more or less embedded residents, all despite lacking security of tenure. Foremen and supervisors often cast themselves as headmen and elders, even holding court and judging disputes, rather than emphasizing formal working roles. Meanwhile, employment itself fluctuates. Even in a postapartheid era of minimum wages, required work conditions, and stipulated access to housing, determining what exactly is formal in farm employment—and delimiting recognizable categories of *worker* and *personnel* among farm dwellers—is no simple matter. And workers' rights are extremely difficult to defend as a result. Periodic inspections come and go, met with silence out of fear of repercussions. There is, anyway, little scrutiny of connections between workplace and residence—precisely those that complicate the category of "worker" in the first place, and that render much of the legal framework discretionary (Human Rights Watch 2006).

Farmers' experiences, meanwhile, are of making their own way. They provide their own infrastructure: graded roads; borehole and pump water; and school buildings for publicly employed teachers with sporadic attendance records. Non-digitized personnel records leave the farms further disconnected from state infrastructures. During my fieldwork, a Department of Health mobile clinic began coming to the farms, but its visits were infrequent. Different state institutions stand for particular kinds of regulation, with different interplays of attention and absence. But in this case, absence predominates.

The army and the police are notable exceptions. For workers and farmers, much everyday interaction with state employees means negotiating their presence. Displacement across the border because of the Zimbabwean crisis has produced a wider climate of popular and media hostility in South Africa, and a border regime of frequent, aggressive police deportation raids.<sup>2</sup> Fearing discovery, seasonal workers during the period of fieldwork would sleep in dry riverbeds in the bush. For

2. In 2009, deportations were suspended, and the Zimbabwe Documentation Project was instituted to register undocumented Zimbabweans en masse. This only reached a minority, and deportations recommenced in late 2011.

farmers, the advantages of docile working populations (see Human Rights Watch 2006) were counterweighed by the bureaucratic nuisance of replacing workers. Deportees anyway generally returned to their jobs within days, after climbing back through the border fence. As for the police, their aggressive presence was only matched by their absence when it came to keeping the peace.

Yet even this coercive dimension of state attention is localized in important ways. Farmers regularly meet police and army chiefs to negotiate exemptions for their workers. As I discuss below, one result has been to recognize private farm ID cards. Farm workers have themselves localized the army presence. Soldiers, lonely in their garrisons, spend weekends at the farm compounds' *shebeens*, and even once assembled a football team to compete in the border's interfarm tournament. Workers draw on soldiers, with their apparently incontestable official positions and uniforms, to mediate disputes and underwrite everyday vigilante justice. By contrast, performance reports to superiors leave the lion's share of garrison life unmonitored.

While states are constituted through mobile presences (see Quirk and Vigneswaran 2015), spotlights of official attention are disconnected and ambiguous. Each is a point of partial regulation. Yet these spotlights become connected. In workforces, official and semiofficial documents are far from incidental. They have varying degrees of authority, which transcend the patchy reach of state institutions, and they become points around which a sense of formality is built through relationships in and beyond the workforce. And these locally authoritative documents become stepping-stones, as recruits try to get ahead as workers and subsequently make further plans. In a setting where the difference between a worker and a transient migrant is often just a matter of timing—as people make and revise plans about when to move and when to stop for a while—documents are the focal points for recognition. And this is especially so in South Africa and its wider regional political economy. Despite the stark deficiencies of grand attempts to register non-white working populations (see Breckenridge 2014), bureaucratic apparatuses and their lacunae have for a long time shaped people's experiences of capitalism. Nevertheless, even the legitimation that comes with established symbols of formality needs to be constantly negotiated.

## The contract

The farm's contracts make workers in a literal sense, by officially marking their recategorization. They make workers real, while also investing them in the reality of a chain of formal documentation. They therefore offer a useful starting point for examining how all this works. The contracts are especially limited spotlights, representing a juxtaposition of formal categorization and fixity, and half-hearted and flexible execution. They demand specifications of "position of employee," area of operation on the estate, working hours, and daily pay. Three lines for completion at the foot of the page—"on behalf of employer," "date," "employee"—suggest a parallel symmetry in the employment situation. But, within this rubric, matters are left as vague as possible. Most employees are simply "farm hands." The workplace of those not based in the packshed is usually "lands," the estate's vast hectares



of orchards, and even this is flexible. And the employee may not actually sign the contract at all.

As for hours and pay, the form of the contract suggests that clock time predominates across the farm. The packshed, run around its conveyor belts, somewhat conforms to this model if one ignores unpaid “preparation time.” But picking in the orchards is worlds away from the contract’s abstract regularity. It is driven instead by the rhythms of gang labor, responding to the exigencies of piece rates and fluctuations in batch processing, and maintained by strings of insistent calls and insults. Teams, and especially their supervisors, compete aggressively and use chalk to mark tallies onto the backs of trailers—a form of inscription whose dynamics of incitement and rivalry are far more clearly connected to the labor process. Payday is a ritual affirming the formality of the contract. One at a time, workers “sign” for pay with a thumbprint, at a table outside the office, in return for a paper packet with an unverifiable amount typed onto the front.<sup>3</sup> In this interaction, employees who consider themselves simply in exile from happier lives confront the flip side of the corporate register of the contract itself. Being recognized as a farm worker by the farm offices means being assumed illiterate, and losing the capacity to sign with a pen.<sup>4</sup> Such treatment has especial historical resonance in South Africa, especially when seen alongside the farm’s unsigned contracts. In the formative early years of apartheid, bureaucratic arguments for fingerprinting precisely undermined the autonomy of black people. Central was the contention that the latter’s signing of labor contracts was an unnecessary inconvenience, in contrast to the efficiency promised by biometric identification. Meanwhile, workers needed written consent from white employers to leave agricultural and other jobs (Breckenridge 2014: 146, 157).

The contract, despite its selectivity and vagueness, draws life through its place in a chain of documentation—a self-referential assemblage in which an official story gradually accumulates (see Latour 2009). This chain is crucial to how workers live through and around paperwork. Their claims to formal identities are negotiated through documents, whose effectiveness comes from their material and aesthetic qualities (see Riles 2006; M. Hull 2012a, 2012b; E. Hull 2012), but which also require convincing performances when they are mobilized (Reeves 2013). Jane Guyer (2004) notes that formality often appears to people in African settings on the margins of bureaucracy through the apparent fixity of more or less official documents. In a workforce like Grootplaas, these work as fragmentary badges of formality—as putative connections to officialdom—because of people’s investment in ensuring their authority and efficacy. Such investment renders the formal categories of the wage economy real, especially through the recognition of workers in

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3. The amount always falls below the minimum wage. Piece rates are set so that workers cannot pick fast enough to make up their theoretical daily amount. There is no risk of added state scrutiny: reportedly, the state’s loss of test farms since apartheid removed its capacity in this regard. Farmers must simply ensure that they coordinate their rates, in conversation with lawyers.
  4. Literacy rates were strikingly high at the time of fieldwork, as many people experienced abrupt downward mobility. They may now be lower because of the decline since 2000 of Zimbabwe’s famously strong education system.

interactions on and beyond the farm. The next section turns to how workers trace stepping-stone routes through their conversions between documents.

## Documentary stepping-stones

Workers are well aware that their stability relies on the skillful mobilization of documents. For new recruits, this awareness is doubly sharpened. Given their transience and vulnerability on the border, migrants' documents—as socially recognized inscriptions of their histories (Ferraris 2013)—represent a particular kind of stability. Zimbabwean national identity cards (*zvitunga*, singular *chitunga*)—durable metal plates—bear their owners' personal information, including area of origin. Sheaves of certificates bearing histories of qualifications—school and even university grades, and various courses and training sessions—are carefully protected in plastic, ready to be revealed and mobilized at the right moment. Yet the same transience presents a problem of everyday storage. I have shown elsewhere (Bolt 2014) that difficulties storing cash lead seasonal workers to entrust their pay to more established permanent workers, and this in turn underpins the farm hierarchy outside of work time. Similar challenges pertain with official and semiofficial documents as well as other possessions that promise to connect past lives to future prospects—from lists of contact numbers to photo albums that prove recruits not “really” to be farm workers. But documents that identify people and their potential value, especially, cannot be entrusted like money. Migrants hang onto the objects that make them who they are, at least until these are superseded by more effective ones. Once migrants are employed, they carry at all times the papers that make them workers in the eyes of police—stapled, tattered, their quarter-fold lines permanently marked with dust.

How does this conversion work? The self-evident way that Zimbabwean identity cards stand for their owners enables them to become points around which workers and jobseekers negotiate their positions. Officially, the recruitment of seasonal workers happens in the open: an official process in which a senior worker stands on a low wall and collects the cards from throngs of outstretched hands. But identity cards are also central to quieter recruitment offstage. The understanding is that if a senior figure agrees to take one's card, it means that one will be given work—an arrangement quickly learned by new arrivals.<sup>5</sup> There are risks in giving up cards. They are periodically misplaced, and workers find themselves in the strange limbo of being on the farm's books but in danger of losing any officially recognized identity. This is all the more alarming because of the difficulty and expense of replacing them. Conversely, once migrants acquire alternative badges of officialdom, a few are willing to abandon their Zimbabwean cards altogether.

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5. This negotiation is highly gendered, as are dynamics in the workforce more generally. The predominately male senior workers are known to demand sexual favors from women in return for preferential access to employment. This may extend into demanding that women undertake domestic tasks, in relationships whose context is men's overwhelming control of accommodation. I describe the gendered character of farm life and workforce hierarchy in detail elsewhere (see Bolt 2013).



Those who do secure a job enter the world of farm paperwork. A corporate-style “application for employment”—which closes with the line, “Thank you for your interest shown in our company”—contrasts with the subsequent fingerprinting and the queue for mug shots, in which exposure to objectification and humiliation by management introduces recruits to the farm’s racialized hierarchy. As with the contract, the information requested is vague and its relevance appears confined to the filing cabinet. Linguistic ability is largely determined by self-assessment. The only two references from previous employers I found in the personnel records simply stated that the workers moved on, “seeking greener pastures.”

But the real importance of these documents is in laying the foundations for others that enable workers to be recognized in everyday terms. In other words, they are offstage parts of the documentary chain through which the formal wage economy is realized. The contract is a point where existing documents are converted into worker status. It asks for the recruit’s ID document number, etched onto the metal card that has already circulated as part of recruitment. It also records any educational qualifications, which may affect getting a job, and some skill is involved in mobilizing them. If they need to be carefully guarded, they also need to be presented quietly and to the right people. One seasonal worker, a former teacher, had A-levels, a bachelor’s degree, and a postgraduate diploma. Announcing his background to Michael, the highly educated personnel manager, initially secured a clerical job. But a soured relationship with him—born of a sense of competition—soon led to demotion back to picking. Michael himself had kept his certificates a secret, and then taken them straight to the farmer, not to a fellow worker.

The farm’s own ID number, generated in completing the contract, gains its true significance after recruitment, because it enables a migrant to live as a worker. It is the basis of a farm ID card, made and issued by farms responding to huge delays in processing seasonal workers. Farm IDs are built on an enduring local understanding of what makes a farm worker. Dependence on proof of attachment to white landowners evokes apartheid-era pass laws, and underlines a legacy on both sides of the border of farmers’ partial sovereignty over land and labor (see Rutherford 2001). Seasonal recruits have long been regularized after they start work, bearing the risks themselves, and then required to prove that they belong to particular estates—sometimes only tacitly and sometimes more explicitly, through ad hoc agreements between farmers, police, and army.

Farm IDs are recognized documents attesting to sponsorship by white farmers, which identify migrants as workers, protect them, but also confine them to their estates. Moving around on the border road, or elsewhere off the estates, is more dangerous. Yet the provisional security afforded by proof of connection to the farms is so valuable for diverse livelihood strategies that a market in forged employment cards developed in the Zimbabwean border town of Beitbridge. The cards’ material form underlines the power relations they represent. As a “graphic genre” (M. Hull 2012b: 15), these documents stand for the private authority of farmers and their families, yet they are in effect semiofficial. Each is homemade, cut from a piece of paper prepared on a home computer. And on each, a cartoon-style, Clipart image of a fruit tree—the farm’s logo—dominates. A monthly hole punch confirms that the bearer has been working on the estate since the card’s date of issue.

Recruits with ID cards are generally considered workers, but this has to be negotiated and renegotiated. Given the market in forgeries, farm ID cards may not be enough to prevent arrest if workers flee when the police arrive—a response that itself renders them suspect. It does not help that farm IDs bear no photographs, unlike the pieces of paper that workers carry once they have been fully regularized. The cards are ambiguous: *semiofficial* (at least as they are treated by representatives of the state), *usually* accepted, *probably* issued by a farmer, but forged with relative ease.

The next stage in workers' recognition and realization is a work permit from Home Affairs. Michael, the personnel manager, decides who among the hundreds of recruits will be taken first to the border post to be processed. During the period of fieldwork, this meant receiving a Zimbabwean Emergency Travel Document (a photocopied sheet of paper<sup>6</sup>), with a photograph stapled to the front and a South African short-term visa subsequently affixed to the back. Some acquire official papers quickly. Others never receive legal documents, a situation worsened by the Home Affairs backlogs that became notorious during fieldwork. Key are connections to powerful senior workers whose threats Michael cannot afford to ignore, or Michael's own demands for favors or his attempts to build a retinue of dependents. Either way, gaining state-issued paperwork and realizing the unambiguous status of worker are inseparable from one's incorporation into around-the-clock farm hierarchies. Beginning in the orchards and the packshed, these extend to entrusting pay to superordinates, and even obtaining the protection required for informal trade and services in the compound. And it is not only that incorporation opens the way to formal documentation. As workers guard their paperwork in back pockets—as it disintegrates and becomes softer and darker, and perhaps accumulates more stamps and adhesive visas—it represents a record crucial for negotiating encounters with border patrols. Even so, police have been known to tear up workers' papers. The only way to be sure that one's worker status transcends particular encounters with police patrols—that it is really real—is to be attached to senior workers who can approach the white farmer, who in turn can chase up the case before deportation occurs.

Recourse to the farmer is most visible, of course, among permanent workers themselves. Fully documented, they are far less vulnerable, and there is no doubt that they are real workers, not border jumpers. Nevertheless, permanent workers' projects for still greater stability occasionally misfire, revealing the continuing importance of being recognized as part of a border workforce. Claiming questionable citizenship (reportedly by having dubious credentials confirmed by employers or purported kin) is risky.<sup>7</sup> One senior worker's ID featured a South African Venda name that he was unable to back up with sufficient local knowledge at a roadblock.

6. ETDs were developed to streamline the documentation of Zimbabwean farm workers, because of a shortage of passports. Access to Zimbabwean passports has since improved.
7. Others have legally acquired a South African ID (although not citizenship) following a letter proving long-term service on the farms. During the Zimbabwe Documentation Project (see footnote 2), some permanent workers were also able to acquire four-year South African visas. But this depended on being physically present at the farm when

The worker called the foreman, who in turn contacted the farmer, who intervened and had his employee released. Further bribes and appeals to the farmer would follow, in future encounters with police. The apparent fixity of meaning of documents gives them a powerful allure, but they remain subject to processes of everyday negotiation in which the ultimate fallback remains that farm residents are understood to be real workers.

A final twist is that as recruits build personal histories through documentation, being a worker enables a life beyond the border farms. Whereas papers attach a worker to a particular employer, for a fixed period, many see them as passports to more open-ended mobility. Police on the roads are assumed not to be able to check immediately whether the permits of absconded workers have been canceled. So many seasonal migrants head for Johannesburg, armed now not only with their certificates and contact numbers but also with pieces of paper—a permit and a visa-adorned travel document—that appear to render them workers in a less personalized and localized register than that of farm ID cards.

## Conclusion

Regulation in practice is relational, and it produces formal people (“workers”) in formal places (“workplaces”). While this may be especially marked in migrant labor regimes that perpetuate vulnerability and dependence on employers, formal regulation classifies people in other labor settings too (see, for example, Dunn 2005 on “standards”). Indeed, more generally still, “persons and relations” are “enacted and realised” through the categories asserted as basic to economic reality (Neiburg and Guyer, this issue: p. 263). This is often a piecemeal process. Workers and workplaces on the border are made through a multiplicity of regulatory lenses, with different purposes and different effects, mirroring the multiplicity of state institutions (see Abrams 1988). Especially noticeable in a setting like South Africa’s margins, official spotlights are limited and bureaucratic infrastructures and documentary networks sparse—far from constituting a thick system of regularities.

Nevertheless, documents are more than just window dressing. Rather than simply standing as the opposite of a “real” informal economy, paperwork’s relative fixity enables the realization of economic roles and places, and their stabilization through time. This fixity is inflected by South Africa’s distinctive history of documentation. Capitalism has for over a century developed symbiotically with the bureaucratic registration of people and the regulation of their movement and settlement. Governmental fantasies of omniscience have always faced the reality of limited control, over people and over the very technologies used to identify them (Breckenridge 2014). Indeed, the awareness of these limits has been as formative as the ambition to achieve control: the particular South African penchant for fingerprinting, for example, began to develop at the turn of the twentieth century because of the “presumption of universal deceit” (Breckenridge 2014: 76). On the Zimbabwean border, fantasies of control have been especially challenged. Militarization jostles with

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Home Affairs officials visited—and many workers were not—which emphasizes the contingent nature of access to documents.

state overstretch, and overlapping documentary regimes coexist with countless transient strangers. Resonating with South Africa's longer history of bureaucracy and its limits, attempts by officials and employers to identify and categorize, and by migrants to be recognized, become all the more important. Despite liberalization, the end of the apartheid order, and the lack of sufficient capacity to enforce new legal measures, paperwork continues to script a range of interactions. Paperwork's fixity, then, reflects its significance over a long period of time, in establishing the terms of life at the intersection of bureaucracy and capitalism.

Yet the result also produces and sustains everyday formality. Documents make workers, opening up possibilities through recognition in day-to-day encounters. As Ian Hacking (2004) notes, "making up people" requires understanding as much through Goffman-esque face-to-face interactions as through Foucauldian disciplining discourses. Workers learn to convert between different documents, using them like stepping-stones to realize an identity as a worker that carries weight with an increasing range of state officials. As people develop pragmatic logics for enacting official process from below (see Coutin 2000), they produce a real economy that is as much made of negotiated formal statuses as it is about their own contingent projects.

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### **Rendre les travailleurs réels: étapes régulatrices et actes fondateurs de documentation dans une ferme frontalière d'Afrique du Sud**

Les documents tiennent une place centrale dans les infrastructures qui composent officiellement la main d'œuvre. Ils offrent une perspective privilégiée sur la façon dont la formalité s'exprime et est vécue comme une force réelle dans la vie des gens. Sur la frontière entre le Zimbabwe et l'Afrique du Sud, où la formalité est en fait un patchwork de "formalisations," des milliers de migrants sont employés dans des fermes consacrées à l'export. Les connections entre les institutions étatiques et les lieux de travail sont des points cruciaux dans l'infrastructure régulatoire. Plus complexes que la protection ou la domination des employés, ou qu'une fiction de façade, ils constituent les travailleurs en les reconnaissant comme plus que des individus en transit. Les travailleurs quant à eux exploitent à leur manière ces points cruciaux: les documents deviennent des actes fondateurs qui donnent à ces migrants des formes d'identité plus durables en tant que travailleurs. Ils naviguent les constellations de points fixes incarnés par les documents, donnent de la cohérence à des expériences fragmentées. Ces jonctions cruciales et ces actes fondateurs sont positionnés à des points où les formalités liés à la régulation et les plans de subsistance se constituent mutuellement, et dans ce processus, établissent un terrain propice à la négociation de la "réalité" dans une économie fondée sur les salaires.

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